

## TRANSCENDENCE AND THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

by David Stewart

In chapter two of his "Transcendental Doctrine of Method," Kant observes that all the interests of reason combine in three questions: 1) What can I know? 2) What ought I to do? and 3) What may I hope?<sup>1</sup> With characteristic modesty Kant asserts that he has exhausted all possible answers to the first question. The second question is purely practical, and although it comes within the scope of pure reason, it is not transcendental but moral, and thus demanded Kant's second *Critique*. But the third question is more of a problem; there is no work expressly labeled a "critique" which treats the question of hope, although it enters into Kant's moral philosophy and his discussion of the categorical imperative. It is possible, however, to consider *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* as Kant's third "critique"; it is a critique of religion in the sense that Kant judges religion by the parameters of morality and identifies religious hope with hope for moral perfection.<sup>2</sup> Two things emerge from considering *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* as a third Kantian critique. First is the close identification of religion with hope which, in the second *Critique*, is made explicit by Kant's treatment of the postulates of morality. Second is the fact that the question, "What may I hope?" is engendered by the question, "What ought I to do?"; Kant is plain on this point.

The third question—If I do what I ought to do, what may I then hope?—is at once practical and theoretical, in such a fashion that the practical serves only as a clue and when this is followed out, to the speculative question. For all *hoping* is directed to happiness, and stands in the same relation to the practical and the law of morality as *knowing* and the law of nature to the theoretical knowledge of things.<sup>3</sup>

This admission is singularly informative, for here Kant ties together the law of morality and hope, while at the same time paralleling them with the law of nature and knowledge examined in the first *Critique*. For there to be knowledge in Kant's sense—that is, knowledge which is both universal and necessary—the intuitions of experience must be categorized and schematized. The road from bare intuitions through the categories and the schematism, with

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detours through the transcendental unity of apperception and a passing glance at the transcendental object, at last reaches the level of judgments.

In the process from intuitions to judgments the role of the categories is central, for without the categories there would be no judgments. The schematism, to be sure, is important, but mainly in showing how the categories are applied to intuitions. But the categories are applicable only within experience and not beyond the realm of sense experience. Nothing is clearer in Kant than the impossibility of transcendental employment of the categories to totalities beyond the bounds of sense. If the elaborate Transcendental Deduction makes anything clear, it is that the categories have only empirical employment.<sup>4</sup>

When Kant turns from pure theoretical reason to pure practical reason, he searches for a basis for the lawfulness of the categorical imperative. Given Kant's love for architectonic, one is not surprised to find Kant presenting a table of categories for practical reason corresponding to the categories of quantity, quality, relation, and modality deduced in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. But the role these "categories" play in Kant's practical philosophy seems minimal, and there are good grounds for Beck's assessment of them as "somewhat artificial and arbitrary, without the completeness and elegance and necessity claimed for the categories of theoretical reason."<sup>5</sup> More important for Kant's ethical philosophy are the postulates of practical reason, which he characterizes as *demands* made by reason. The significance of this, I am convinced, has not been given due attention, for it provides a key to understanding what Kant's connection between religion and morality really implies.

#### THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Any consideration of Kant's moral philosophy must begin with the categorical imperative and its source, the good will. The good will, and the good will alone, Kant reminds us, is the only thing that is good without qualification.<sup>6</sup> From the good will stems an unconditioned demand that one ought to do one's duty. This demand is unconditioned by any prudential concern; hence it is categorical. Come hell or high water, I ought to do my duty; reason, in its autonomy and self-legislative employment, demands this of every reasonable being. The categorical imperative can be stated formally: act only on that maxim that can be willed a universal law of nature; treat humanity either in your own person or that of others always as an end and never as a means; and act only on that maxim which is autonomously self-legislated. This is familiar ground, and it represents the heart of Kant's moral theory. There is more to come.

A necessary condition for moral law, as Kant reminds us in the preface to his second *Critique*, is the concept of freedom, the reality of which is an apodictic law of practical reason.<sup>7</sup> But how does Kant “prove” freedom? One will look in vain for a deductive or logical proof; such is not Kant’s style. Indeed, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* the categories were not proved deductively or logically but transcendently; that is, the categories were shown to be necessary conditions for knowledge. The style of Kant’s proof is *quid juris*, the “proof” is the proof of the law court. Similarly, in the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant calls morality before the court of reason and demands a proof of the necessity of freedom. And if Kant is not the judge, at least he is the inquisitor extracting the preconditions for moral judgments in the same way he discovered the preconditions for theoretical judgments in his first *Critique*. The “I ought” implies “I can”; else morality would be a fleeting chimera not grounded in universal law. If we are to make sense out of any moral imperative, whether hypothetical or categorical, apodictic or relative, we must accept freedom as a necessary condition. Freedom is thus “proved” by Kant as a postulate essential to the exercise of the imperatives of a moral will.<sup>8</sup> If the specter of the first *Critique* was Humean skepticism, the bogeyman of the second *Critique* was ethical determinism.

But the postulate of freedom calls for a second and a third. Freedom is not only the keystone of the moral law but provides “stability and objective reality” to the additional postulates of practical reason—God and immortality.<sup>9</sup> The latter two concepts are not themselves conditions of the moral law but are “the conditions of applying the morally determined will to the object which is given to it *a priori* (the highest good).”<sup>10</sup> What is significant here is that the intention of the will—*die Absicht aufs höchste Gut*—is not *given* to practical reason but *demanded* by it; the highest good is a *Verlangen*, a demand for totality which results from the necessary connection (*Zusammenhang*) between morality and happiness.<sup>11</sup>

As a teacher of Kant’s works, I frequently find students making a wrong turn here. The phrase “highest good” seems to summon up the notion of God. But Kant is not referring to God as the highest good, although the students’ mistake is a natural one. A good medieval (and Cartesian) definition of God is the unity of all transcendental perfections; God is not only highest in the order of goodness but also in beauty, truth, and being. Particularly if echoes of idealism are still resounding in their heads, students seem to reason in this fashion: Kant says that reason in its practical employment demands totality, the highest good. The highest good is God; therefore, the source and ground of the moral imperative is God. God is not only the *ens realissimum* but also the *ens perfectissimum* and the *ens bonissimum*. Therefore, the moral law within, like the starry heavens above, declares not only the glory but the reality of God as well.

This kind of argument has its attractions, to which I will return later, but the argument is not Kantian. The highest good is not God but is what we can best describe as a state of affairs—a situation in which morality and happiness are conjoined. Reason demands that the picture of the righteous suffering and the wicked prospering is intolerable—not only morally intolerable but rationally intolerable. The virtuous man ought to be the happy man; the wicked man should suffer the results of his moral perversity. Alas, the world is not like this; the necessary connection between morality and happiness is not realized in this world. Although the idea of a moral world has objective reality, not as an intelligible intuition (Kant says we are unable to think any such world), its objectivity is that of an object of pure practical reason. Such a world Kant describes as a *corpus mysticum* of free and rational beings under the moral law in which every such being would act in complete conformity with the moral law and in unity with the freedom of every other person. Such a world would be possible, Kant says, only if some Supreme Reason is posited as the underlying nature and cause of this necessary connection between the demand of the moral law and the hope for happiness. It is this demand of practical reason for totality that leads Kant at the conclusion of the *Critique of Pure Reason* to postulate God and a future life as inseparable from the sense of duty imposed by the moral law. God is required to bring about the *summum bonum* as well as a future life in which such a state of affairs can arise.

Thus without a God and without a world invisible to us now but hoped for, the glorious ideas of morality are indeed objects of approval and admiration, but not springs of purpose and action. For they do not fulfil in its completeness that end which is natural to every rational being and which is determined *a priori*, and rendered necessary, by that same pure reason.<sup>12</sup>

It at first appears contradictory that Kant would reinstate God and a future life as “postulates” of practical reason when he had previously ruled them out in his critique of the transcendental illusion. The transcendental illusion results from the attempt to extend our knowledge beyond the phenomenal to the noumenal order, to apply the categories of the understanding in a realm that is beyond the bounds of sense. How, then, can Kant appeal to God and a future existence for the human personality when he had so strenuously ruled out such considerations in his first *Critique*? One answer to this question is provided by Paul Ricoeur, who suggests that for Kant the transcendental illusion was only possible because there is a legitimate thought of the unconditioned; and one will fail to understand Kant’s postulation of freedom, God, and a future life unless he sees them as subtle reinstatements of the transcendent objects which the *Critique of Pure Reason* denounced as illusory. Ricoeur interprets the postulates of practical reason as expressing the

minimal existential implication of a practical aim, of an *Absicht*, which cannot be converted into intellectual intuition. The 'extension'—*Erweiterung*—the 'accesion'—*Zuwachs*—they express is not an extension of knowledge and awareness but a 'disclosure,' an *Eröffnung* (*Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 140); this 'disclosure' is the philosophic equivalent of hope.<sup>13</sup>

#### HOPE AND TRANSCENDENCE

One crucial difference in Kant's treatment of God, freedom, and immortality as postulates of practical reason and his critique of them in the transcendental illusion centers on their role for practical reason vis-à-vis the theoretical use of reason. The transcendental illusion results from the attempt to apply the categories transcendently, and Kant's critique of this shows that any effort to extend knowledge to include such totalities is doomed to failure. This is the reason for Kant's insistence that the ideas of practical reason give no extension or enlargement to theoretical reason; the postulates themselves are merely immanent and constitutive and are the grounds for the possibility of realizing the necessary object of pure practical reason, i.e., the highest good.<sup>14</sup> But if the possible object of practical reason is not given in intuition, how can it be thought? What may be needed is a new "category," a true category of practical reason. Such a "category" seems to be implicit in the dialectic of practical reason itself, for hope—or to use Kant's term, expectation (*Erwartung*)—fulfills this role. Hope, like the categories of quantity, quality, relation, and modality, is a pure concept of reason given prior to any experience, for hope defines the structures of consciousness in relation to the ideas of practical reason and the highest good as the object and final aim of practical reason. The object of hope, however, is not given in intuition; the highest good is demanded by practical reason in its search for totalization.

Kant had already seen the close identification of hope and religion. This identification is not merely arbitrary, for its necessity is seen even more clearly when hope is raised to the level of a category of practical reason in its demand for totality. This also signals a "Copernican Revolution" in Kant's moral religion: religion is not just a projection of human aspirations into the divine, as Feuerbach thought, nor does religion result from man's thwarted quest for happiness. It is rather a necessary addition to morality so that the demands of practical reason can be "springs of action and purpose." Seen under the category of hope, religion is an essential end of practical reason; subsumed under the category of expectation, the postulates of practical reason are necessary conditions for the achievement of the possible object of the will's moral intention.

#### HOPE AND MORALITY

The importance of hope for Kantian moral theory is clearly seen in its relation to the moral imperative. Reason indeed can, in its autonomy, legislate

the moral action, but it is incapable of bringing about the highest good. Only a Supreme Reason can effect the *summum bonum*. Though noble and a cause for wonder, the moral imperative is incomplete; without hope it cannot provide "springs of action and purpose." Only the highest good demanded as an intention of the good will can guarantee the applicability of the moral imperative in its categorical purity. So in answer to the question, "What may I hope?" Kant would answer: "You may hope for the ultimate unification of virtue and happiness; reason demands this. But if not in this life, surely in the life to come. The necessary presupposition for this hope is the Supreme Reason, and though reason in its theoretical employment cannot present such a totality to itself, reason in its practical employment provides grounds for this conviction." One could say, although not in Kantian language, that the categorical imperative, in order to be applicable to human endeavors, is complete only when it is grounded in a transcendent reality. The idea of God, which was ruled out by the transcendental illusion and had only limited application as a regulative idea, is now seen to be the ground of moral action.

Would Kant have agreed with Ivan Karamazov's claim that without God everything would be permitted? Clearly Kant would not have wanted to agree with this, for the good will, in its legislative autonomy, would dictate the moral choice even if there were no God. But for such maxims to become actions, Kant seems to imply that the intention of the will, the aim for the highest good, is required. Just as the categories had to be schematized in order to apply to intuitions, so the moral imperative must be related to human actions by means of hope for the highest good. And the highest good is only thinkable on the supposition of the existence of a Supreme Reason who can bring about such a state of affairs.

Kant's appeal to God in a kind of postscript to his moral theory is at first troubling. Troubling not only because the stern denunciation of the Transcendental Illusion looms as large as ever, but troubling too because the premises upon which Kant builds his basis for belief in God have led others to opposite conclusions. Consider the bare outlines of Kant's argument: If I am to take morality seriously, reason demands that virtue and happiness ought to be conjoined. Nothing, however, is more obvious than the fact that they are not conjoined in this life. But they *must* be conjoined; reason demands it. Therefore, there will be a future life in which this conjunction takes place. A necessary condition for hope in such a future life is God. Therefore, God exists. Put in this fashion the argument seems to lead inexorably to God, but one gets the impression from reading Kant that the rational grounds for belief in God were merely a transcendent prop for his ethical views. This question aside, the real problem is discovering whether Kant's argument carries the burden he thought it did.

Even a cursory reading of the philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries makes clear that the most obvious ground for atheism is moral

outrage. From Ivan Karamazov's insistence that he could not believe in a God who allowed innocent children to suffer, to Albert Camus's railings against the absurdity of a world which refuses to conform to human, moral demands, the rejection of God's existence on moral grounds has played counterpoint to the other concerns of contemporary philosophers. The argument starts from Kantian premises: the superabundance of evil in the world makes clear that the world is not the *summum bonum*, and reason denounces the hiatus between morality and happiness as absurd. A loving God, possessed with the omnipotence ascribed to him by believers, would not tolerate such a world. Since such a world is too plainly with us, God does not exist. All these objections were plainly stated in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, and there is no reason to suppose that Kant was unfamiliar with them. Yet Kant does not respond to such objections directly, although he does so indirectly in his analysis of moral evil in his "Essay on Radical Evil."

From the Kantian viewpoint, it is startling to see the atheist, armed with his consciousness of moral law, declaring that the moral perversity in the world implies the nonexistence of God. But the reasoning is straightforward: the world does not conform to reason's demands; therefore the world is absurd. The world does not conform to reason's specific demands of what it would be if there existed a beneficent God; therefore God does not exist. In contrast, Kant's assertion is: the world does not conform to reason's demands; therefore God exists and will guarantee a future life in which reason's demands will be fulfilled. This is not a dictate of reason in its theoretical employment; it is rather a demand of practical reason as a necessary condition that must be acknowledged if we are to take moral imperatives seriously as springs of action and purpose.

I think we can add to this Kantian rejoinder by returning to some of the implications of the second *Critique*. If man were merely a phenomenal creature bound by the inexorable constraints of causal necessity, a chance by-product of an impersonal cosmos, then the moral question would not have arisen. The first question, What may I know? would be the final question. But the moral question is raised, and it is raised by reason. The implications of the categorical demands of morality are startling in their power to revise Kant's view of man offered in the first *Critique*. The categorical imperative calls forth the postulates of freedom, God, and a future life, with the corresponding alterations requiring that man be seen as more than a phenomenal being. Reason in its practical employment forces us to see man as a noumenal self, free to obey the dictates of reason in its self-legislative autonomy as it wills categorically the moral imperative. I would hasten to add, for this is the real point of my argument, that all this is grounded, for Kant, in the transcendent reality of God. Kant's moral "proof" of the existence of God is not a mere addition to his ethical theory, as might first appear, but is an integral aspect of his ethical views. "The idea of the highest good," Kant says,



inseparably bound up with the purely moral disposition, cannot be realized by man himself . . . yet he discovers within himself the duty to work for this end. Hence he finds himself impelled to believe in the cooperation of management of a moral Ruler of the world, by means of which alone this goal can be reached.<sup>15</sup>

Kant inseparably unites the idea of God with the moral imperative, but he does so by means of the concept of the *summum bonum*. Why does he not take the more direct step of grounding the moral consciousness of man in the transcendence of God? Part of the problem Kant faced was that of reconciling the self-legislated *autonomy* of the categorical imperative with the specter of a heteronomous morality legislated by God. In other words, could man *freely* choose the good if this choice were grounded in God as the source of moral values? Because this problem loomed in the background, Kant preferred to relate God to the categorical imperative only indirectly, as the guarantor of the *summum bonum*. Perhaps an additional consideration was the false identification of supposed duties with the "will of God." Too many wars have been fought in God's name for such an easy identification to be admitted; and Kant's own fierce criticisms of clericalism and false religion provide ample caveats for the unwary. In contrast, Kant proposed to test all religious duties by the moral criterion; we can judge all religious dogmas by such a standard, accepting those that pass and discarding those that fail.

The closest Kant ever comes to grounding the categorical imperative directly in the transcendent reality of God is to declare it a mystery; it is mysterious because of reason's inability to comprehend how man can be free yet simultaneously submitted to a divinely grounded moral law. Yet he seems to recognize the appeal of such a view.

We can conceive of the universal *unconditioned* subjection of man to the divine legislation only so far as we likewise regard ourselves as God's *creatures*; just as God can be regarded as the ultimate source of all natural laws only because He is the creator of natural objects . . . So the legislation which is divine and holy, and therefore concerns free beings only, cannot through the insight of our reason be reconciled with the concept of the creation of such beings; rather must one regard them even now as existing free beings who are determined not through their dependence upon nature by virtue of their creation but through a purely moral necessitation possible according to the laws of freedom, *i.e.*, a call to citizenship in a divine state. Thus the call to this end is morally quite clear, while for speculation the possibility of such a calling is an impenetrable mystery.<sup>16</sup>

Neither noumenal freedom nor hope for a future life was comprehensible by speculative reason; both are postulated by, demanded by, reason in its practical employment. Similarly, practical reason demands that happiness and virtue ought to coincide. How are we to understand such a demand? Is finite, human reason its source? Or is such a realization grounded in the transcendent reality of God?



It would appear that Kant explicitly avoids such a conclusion because of the difficulty in reconciling reason's autonomy and freedom with God as the source of moral law. But one can appeal here to Ricoeur's interpretation of the postulates of practical reason as openings to another dimension of human experience. To use Jaspers's term, one could say that the moral law is a cipher of transcendence, an indication of a transcendent ground to moral experience. But this dimension is closed to speculative reason and can be approached only as mystery. To some, the picture of the icy logician of Königsberg moving toward mystery will be offensive. Perhaps they will conclude that all this is merely a remnant of Kant's pietistic upbringing, although such a response is psychologistic in the extreme. Perhaps it is less offensive to see Kant's being led by the logic of his moral theory to a position which he only reluctantly accepts. Yet it seems more plausible to me to believe that Kant was recognizing that the human moral consciousness points to a dimension of experience which can be approached only as mystery. Such an interpretation is shared by Jaspers, who observes: "Kant assumes that there is, at the confines of reason, a realm of the unfathomable and mysterious. But the unfathomable is not the irrational; rather, it is something which reason experiences as the limit of reason. . . ." <sup>17</sup>

## NOTES

1. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1961), A805.
2. Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 62.
3. *Critique of Pure Reason*, B834.
4. *Ibid.*, B148.
5. Lewis White Beck, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 154.
6. Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1959), p. 9.
7. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Library of Liberal Arts, 1956), pp. 3-4.
8. See *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 66.
9. *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 3.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
11. I owe this observation to Paul Ricoeur, "Freedom in the Light of Hope," *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 416.
12. *Critique of Pure Reason*, B841.

13. Ricoeur, "Freedom in the Light of Hope," p. 418.
14. *Critique of Practical Reason*, pp. 139ff.
15. *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, p. 130.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 133–134.
17. Karl Jaspers, *Kant*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), p. 86. This work is an excerpt from Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, vol. I.